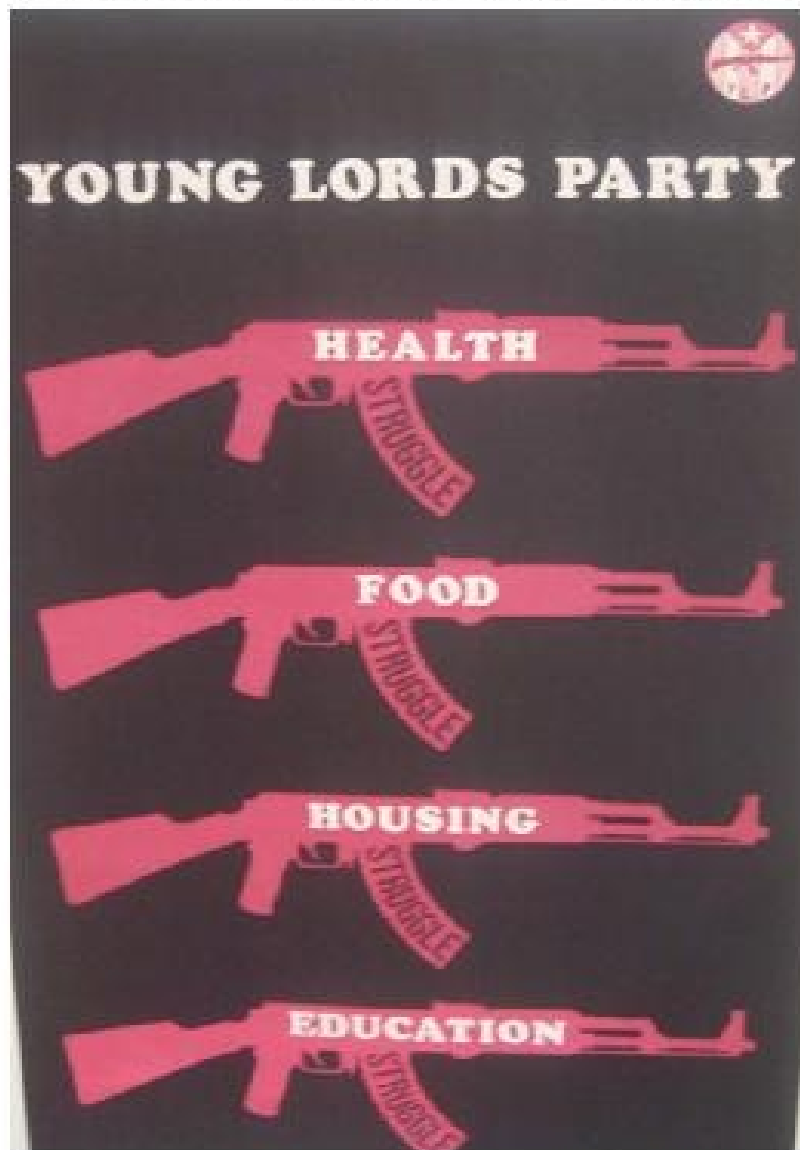


The Young Lords Party: examining its deficit of democracy and decline



A critique of the Young Lords lack of internal democracy and its contribution towards their decline. We do not agree with some aspects of this article (positive perspective on nationalism, democratic centralism), but feel it provides some other valuable information.

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stuff that I ain’t *never* heard a spic say,” said Pablo “Yoruba” Guzmán, one of the founding members of the New York branch of the Young Lords Organization, in an interview. “That’s what really got us started. That’s all it was, man.”¹

Guzmán and several friends traveled to Chicago from East Harlem, New York, to meet with Jimenez in 1969. When they arrived back home they formed the

New York Young Lords.

The organization enjoyed remarkable success for two years in providing essential services to the community in “El Barrio” or pressuring the city into expanding them through direct action. The group grew in power, in numbers, and in the strength of its relationship to the community.

By 1976, however, the organization in New York ceased to exist and its downward spiral had begun as soon as late 1970. In this paper I explore the reasons for the Young Lords’ short-lived success and rapid decline. My focus is on the New York chapter.

The New York Young Lords broke under the weight of unrelenting police harassment and infiltration, compounded by a series of tactical missteps that ignored the main source of their strength – their support from the Puerto Rican urban poor. These communities were oppressed and ignored, rather than represented, by social institutions. The Young Lords stepped into that vacuum and restored a sense of pride and togetherness to “El Barrio” in East Harlem. But the leadership of the organization subsequently turned its focus away from the direct action campaigns that inspired unprecedented solidarity in the ghetto. The group’s paramilitary structure was over-dependent on the charisma and cooperation of a few leaders and failed to recognize the voices of the Young Lords’ rank and file members. An attempt to open a revolutionary front on the island of Puerto Rico proved to be a fatal mistake, spreading the organization too thin, diverting resources from community programs, and initiating an acrimonious factionalism in the leadership from which the Lords would not recover. With much of the original leadership resigned or exiled, a hardline Marxist clique took over the Lords and it disintegrated.

What the Lords achieved in the first few years is nothing short of remarkable. The New York chapter was started by six or seven mostly college-educated Puerto Rican youth. Radicalized by the turbulence of the 1960s and the racism against Puerto Ricans they witnessed growing up, they formed a reading group at Queens College called “La Sociedad de Albizu Campos”

to study Puerto Rican nationalism and revolutionary texts. Inspired by the student militants across the country and the explosion of Third World liberation movements the world over, they “went back to El Barrio to start the revolution.”² Having been away from their community for so long, Miguel

Melendez describes their first step: We read books on how Mao Tse-tung had unleashed the revolutionary forces in China, and on Ho Chi Minh's strategies to liberate Vietnam – anything we thought would help us.

Toiling at our studies, we developed a good sense of what the people needed and how to proceed in order to succeed in political struggles. . .or so we thought.³

Yet the key to the Lords' early success was their willingness to set aside their academic and revolutionary beliefs and simply listen to the people of East Harlem describe their needs.

Juan Gonzalez, who helped lead the student occupation at Columbia University but became alienated by the racism of his white comrades in Students for a Democratic Society⁴, insisted that the group go to the streets to "ask people what they wanted." Felipe Luciano, who would become the Chairman of the Young Lords, reflected:

So we went onto 110th street. And we actually asked the people what do you think you need

– is it housing, is it police brutality, is it. . .La basura [the garbage]? And I thought, "My god.

All this romance, all this ideology to pick up garbage?" But that's what they wanted.⁵

This critical work of listening to the people's needs and successfully organizing to address them would characterize the Young Lords in the coming year. Marxist ideology was a useful framework for activism, but the targets of the Lords' campaigns were dictated by the community. In the summer of 1969 the Lords executed "the Garbage Offensive" to remove trash left in streets by the city government. They appropriated brooms from the city's sanitation department and began sweeping. Hundreds of people, young and old, men and women, joined in cleaning up their neighborhoods.⁶ They blockaded the streets with garbage piled five feet-high and set the waste on fire, immediately grabbing the attention of the media and public. When the police arrived, the Lords took off their berets and blended into the crowd.⁷ To a degree, they were lucky in that the liberal mayor of the city, John Lindsay, was vulnerable to political pressure at the time. New York City's outdated waste disposal system was resented by citizens across the city. ⁸ A sympathetic city official was quickly dispatched to El Barrio

to meet with the Young Lords and sanitation trucks began making regular trips to the area to clean up the trash, though the Lords would repeat their “offensives” against garbage several times over.⁹

The immediate victory boosted the Lords’ confidence and their profile in the community. The group organized programs for free clothing and breakfasts that grew in popularity. By the fall of 1969, the Lords moved to occupy the First Spanish Methodist Church, which was dormant most of the week but whose pastor refused to work with the Lords to expand their community services. When Felipe Luciano, the charismatic chairman of the Lords, approached the altar one day to address the congregation directly, he was surrounded, badly beaten and arrested by the police. The incident garnered front-page headlines and the community rallied against the pastor and his cooperation with police. Three weeks later the Lords took over the building and named it “The People’s Church.” Iris Morales, one of the first women to join the Lords, wrote later:

We proved that programs to serve the barrio community were possible when there was political will. Thousands of people passed through the doors of the People’s Church, attracted by the spirit and clarity of purpose. We explained our programs and recruited hundreds of supporters.¹⁰

After eleven days the police moved in and Lords were evicted. 106 members were lead out of the building in handcuffs. But the occupation of the church demonstrated to the community of El Barrio the power of collective direct action in the face of neglect and abuse by established institutions.

Through the following year the Lords continued to engage in community organizing, particularly around health issues, through direct action. They went door-to-door conducting lead testing on residents who lived in shoddy tenements. The shocking results of their survey were made public and the mayor acted swiftly to ban the use of lead-based paint.

The Lords hit the streets in June of 1970 to administer tests and confirm an outbreak of tuberculosis. The limited healthcare system serving the community was oblivious to the epidemic and the Lords asked the city’s Health Department for urgent help. The department’s bureaucrats refused. Miguel Melendez’ memoir describes the reaction of the Lords’

leadership: “This time, Juan Gonzalez would take the lead. ‘Appropriate the

truck,' he said.

Further explanation was unnecessary. Everyone nodded in agreement before he was able to utter another word.”¹¹ In this episode the paramilitary structure of the organization functioned well. The threat to the community was obvious to the group’s leadership, as was the solution. The task of hijacking the city’s mobile X-ray truck that could expand tuberculosis testing was delegated to less senior members, who pulled it off successfully.

The next month the Lords led about 300 youth in a 12-hour occupation of Lincoln Hospital, the only hospital serving El Barrio, demanding door-to-door preventive health services, maternal and child care, drug addiction care, senior citizens’ services, 24-hour a day grievance tables, and increased minimum wage for hospital workers.¹² The action was successful in spotlighting the horrible conditions at the deteriorating facility and galvanizing the city to improve health services for the community. Construction began on a new hospital which would open in 1976.

The Young Lords in El Barrio reached the height of their strength during this period in the summer of 1970. The success of each “offensive” for sanitation or healthcare was built upon the previous one and the Lords enjoyed widespread support from the community. But even during the Lords’ first year, marked by so many achievements, there were problems indicating structural weaknesses in the organization. The Lords were founded and directed through a Central Committee of all-male and mostly college-educated youth who identified as Marxists or Maoists. Their backgrounds disproportionately shaped the character of the organization, and not always for the better.

The enshrinement of “revolutionary machismo” in the Lords’ original 13-point platform, for example, made it difficult for young women to exercise their full potential within the organization. “Life for women in the organization was pretty miserable,” Denise Oliver later told filmmakers.¹³ While the Lords’ policy was to “grant all members access to all organizational activities,” women were blocked from taking leadership roles¹⁴. Women, who made up almost half of the organization, met for months in their own caucus and withheld sexual relations from the men until their demands were ratified by the all-male Central Committee in June of 1970.¹⁵

The withholding of sex showed that the youthful passion running through the

Young Lords wasn't always under control or put to positive ends. The organization encouraged sexual relationships among members but forbade ones with outsiders due to fear of infiltration.

Every member of the Central Committee violated this rule during the "no sex" strike. Felipe Luciano, the popular chairman and face of the organization, was severely demoted two months later for his infidelity and he left the Lords.¹⁶ Miguel Melendez felt the loss of Luciano was a blow to the entire group:

Publicly, we lost the most recognized person and voice of the Young Lords. Privately, we had lost our charismatic leader. . . His exit challenged the organization's leadership to reassess their methods, and the cadres had to overcome hero worship and personal loyalties. . .¹⁷

Other former Lords claimed in a 1977 post-organization critique that "the most eloquent, expressive, flamboyant types were very often found on or around the leadership of the organization."¹⁸ The Lords were too reliant on their charismatic founders, who were accountable only to the shared social circle of the Central Committee, not the membership at large, and not easily replaced.

The Lords professed an adherence to "democratic centralism." The organization was built on three levels of command: a diverse group of hundreds of rank-and-file youth known as

"cadres," individuals who led each "ministry" – ministries of education, defense, and information, for example – and a Central Committee at the head. There were general meetings at which members could discuss and debate, but each level of command was to obey the one above it once a decision was made. Contrary to orthodox democratic centralism, there were no elections or rotating leaderships. While the Lords thought of themselves as democratic, Iris Morales believes there was too much centralization of power: In practice, the Central Committee made all decisions and set the direction of the organization. . . Emphasis on strict adherence to Central Committee directives frequently

stifled member creativity and initiative. Charismatic leadership sustained the organization initially but not over the long term.¹⁹

Pablo Guzmán, one of the Lords founders, later acknowledged in a community forum, "When we did not thoroughly involve the membership in the democracy of the organization^¼that's where we went off."²⁰ The centralized military

structure worked when there was consensus among the Central Committee's members, but the decision-making process was ill-suited to resolving serious disputes or functioning without charismatic leaders like Luciano. And it was not democratic.

Notwithstanding the group's military structure, most Lords were not armed. While the Lords out-maneuvered the police on several occasions, they had no answer for local organized crime in early 1970. The Lords rehabilitation program cut into the profits of local drug dealers. When a prominent dealer was found hung from a streetlamp, rumors spread that the Lords were behind the killing, even though the man was likely murdered by another gang.

Soon word got out that the mafia was targeting Lords leaders, but before anyone was hurt Guzmán's father arranged a meeting with mob. They said they would leave the Lords alone only if their drug dealers could carry on their business. Miguel Melendez wrote in his memoir:

This time there had been no massive mobilization of the community, no active involvement of common people. . . We had ventured alone into turf ruled by violence...Never again did the Young Lords so much as tempt another clash with organized crime.

The Lords' leadership, unable to harness to power of the cadres in this situation, were powerless before the mafia and had no choice but to scale back their anti-drug program.²¹

After this incident Melendez was given the responsibility of building up an underground armed branch of the organization. But the idea that the mob would leave the Lords alone if they were armed or that the Lords could survive a mafia assault seems fanciful.

The violent reality of the ghetto meant that the New York Lords needed to be less isolated from other groups and more street-smart. But in May of 1970 the New York Lords decided to become the Young Lords "Party" and formally split with the original gang of Lords in Chicago. "The Young Lords in Chicago were too street for the Young Lords from New York, they didn't have political, philosophical sophistication that the New York folks did,"

according to Puerto Rican historian Mervin Mendez.²² Frank Browning reported for Ramparts Magazine at the time: "The Chicago people feel the New Yorkers

were preoccupied with ideological refinement, whereas they had neither the time nor the educational background to concentrate on theoretical work.”²³ The New York Lords could have benefited from a strong relationship with the Chicago chapter, which survived longer and under more violent attacks. But the leadership was increasingly invested in the idea of building a revolutionary political party and they moved to end the association with the Chicago Young Lords merely because that group appeared less ideological and professional.

Still, to the extent that the Central Committee members could set aside their own biases and orient the Lords around tangible community needs, the New York organization was able to grow in strength and carry out successful “offensives” one after another in its first 18 months.

At the end of 1970 they could count 1000 Lords members.²⁴ The Lords led the way in confronting racism within the Puerto Rican community, promoting members of African and Taquino heritage into the higher ranks and encouraging genuine cultural expression. They published a regular newspaper, broadcast a weekly “Palante” radio show on Pacifica station WBAI, and began organizing “Free Puerto Rico Committees” in colleges around the northeast.²⁵ Lords chapters were established in Philadelphia, Newark, and Hayward, California.²⁶

Harsh government repression, from the federal level to the local police, was the critical factor in exploiting pre-existing flaws and accelerating the Lords’ decline. The FBI’s COINTELPRO program explicitly directed agents to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” movement leaders across the political spectrum, including those

“Seeking Independence for Puerto Rico.”²⁷ The Young Lords in New York were founded when the Sociedad de Albizu Campos merged with another group of self-identified Lords from East Harlem – it was discovered that the latter group was already been penetrated by the New York Red Squad, the police intelligence unit dedicated to quashing radical movements.²⁸ Guzman’s father was followed and harassed by the FBI. From the start, the Lords did not keep membership lists and were less democratic than they might have otherwise been for fear of infiltration by the authorities.²⁹ Members were routinely arrested and beaten by the police. The Philadelphia chapter in particular was the subject of constant attacks by the city’s police, including the firebombing of its offices.

The death of Julio Roldán in a New York jail cell in September 1970 marked an

escalation in the repression and a turning point for the organization. The bright young Vietnam veteran, who was best known for cooking hearty meals for other Lords, was picked up by the police on a street corner during one of the Lords' anti-garbage operations. News broke the following morning that he was found hung in his cell, along with at least eight other inmates. The authorities claimed the inmates had all committed suicide, but the bodies showed signs of being badly beaten. The Lords were outraged. They hid guns in Roldán's coffin and with thousands of supporters marched it in procession from the funeral home to the Methodist church they had once occupied, only to take it over again. Brandishing shotguns, they declared to the press that the Lords would now engage in armed self-defense by any means necessary.³⁰ The Lords would hold the church for several weeks before being forced out.

(Guzman believes there was at least one undercover cop amongst their ranks by this point.³¹) The apparent murder of Roldán distracted the Lords from their community programs. More resources were allocated for building up the underground armed branch of the organization and outreach to prisoners. Some Lords were further radicalized by Roldán's death. Felipe Luciano, the former Lords chairman, reflected, "When the party decided to hurt itself...for me, it was when the second church takeover occurred. There was a lot of posturing and grandstanding." He left or was pushed out of the organization, and the party's newspaper condemned him for "extreme opportunism."³² Enduring and bitterly opposed factions emerged when some in the Central Committee began to think that Roldán may have actually taken his own life. Miguel Melendez wrote in his memoir that his death "was pivotal in bringing about our disintegration."³³ Unlike previous building occupations, the second takeover of the "People's Church" did not achieve any tangible victory for the community of El Barrio. No one was ever held responsible for Roldán's death. The open display of weapons did, however, agitate the FBI and lead to increased surveillance and repression against the Lords.

Rather than renew its focus on improving conditions in the ghetto, from poverty to police brutality, the leadership of the Lords became divided on the largely unrelated question of whether to establish a militant pro-independence branch on the island of Puerto Rico. The Lords helped lead massive student mobilizations in protest for Puerto Rican independence just before and after Roldán's death. Encouraged by these demonstrations, the "revolutionary nationalist contingent of the party" felt the primary goal of the Lords should be the independence of Puerto Rico from the United States, and they won the "tug-of-war" within the

leadership.³⁴

The Lords launched “Ofensiva Rompecadenas” (“Break-the-Chains Offensive”) in March of 1971. The plan to create Young Lords chapters of workers and students to organize for

independence on the island was a total failure. Members who traveled to Puerto Rico were considered by the government and many islanders to be troublemakers. The existing pro-independence groups on the island did not embrace them. One branch on the island defected from the organization and was condemned for “factionalism” by the Central Committee. A leader of the Philadelphia Lords chapter, Juan Ramos, described the relationship between the mainland Lords leadership and island activists as “the politics of Puerto Rico versus the politics of the big cities.” (He also said it was at this time that “the infiltration really became very, very concentrated.” ³⁵) The Lords, many of whom did not speak Spanish well or at all, proved to be irrelevant and unwelcome on the island.

Several former Lords leaders describe the attempt to organize for independence inside Puerto Rico as the “biggest mistake” the organization ever made. As members and resources were sent to Puerto Rico, free clothing and food programs in El Barrio stopped. Volunteers left and offices closed down. “Many of the things which had made us strong [in El Barrio] were no longer there,” said Iris Morales in her film about the Young Lords, “Palante.”³⁶ The group lost a battle with the police that spring for control of the New York Puerto Rican Day Parade.

The police anticipated the Lords’ action and attacked Lords cadres, who were missing helmets they were promised by the leadership, as well as parade-goers indiscriminately –

further eroding what trust the community still had in the Lords.³⁷ In taking on the issue of Puerto Rican independence, the Lords were also subject to “much stronger vigilance and much stronger investigation” from the authorities, in the words of Juan Gonzalez.³⁸

By the fall of 1971 the unraveling of the group had begun in earnest. A new Central Committee was assembled which centered around Gloria Fontáñez, who was intent on enforcing a strict Marxist-Maoist political line. A special issue of

the Lords newspaper in April of 1972 declared, “We are a Party in transformation that recognizes the proletariat as the leader of the revolution.” (The Black Panther Party, which had been a steadfast ally of the Young Lords from its founding in Chicago, was suddenly absent from the Lords’ list of allied groups in the paper. 39) Diana Caballero told filmmakers this “meant working organizational members being pulled out of student organizing or work in public schools with parents to go into the factories and work directly with workers.”⁴⁰

When Pablo Guzmán returned from a Lords-organized trip to China at the end of the year, he was alarmed by the number of resignations from the Lords and lack of community programs.

He wrote a paper arguing that the move to Puerto Rico was a mistake and outlined a plan to rebuild the community programs in El Barrio. Many longtime Lords, including co-founder Juan “Fi” Ortiz and Iris Morales, supported it. At a meeting the position paper was adopted, but Guzman and his allies were “exiled” to Philadelphia and other chapters outside New York by Fontáñez’ Central Committee. Guzmán and Ortiz considered starting another group for their many supporters, but Guzmán “was haunted by the corpses of factionalism that littered the Left” and held out hope of restoring the Lords to their former stature. It never happened.

In July of 1972 the Young Lords Party officially became the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers’ Organization (PRRWO) under the direction of Fontáñez. There was no democracy in the group, an emphasis on strict adherence to Marxist-Maoist ideology, little to no community organizing, and it quickly became irrelevant. Iris Morales, who remained in the group until 1975, wrote later, “The ruling group maintained control by accusing everyone who disagreed with them of being agents and collaborators. The accusations lost credibility and allowed real agents to continue to operate in the movement unexposed.” Several longtime Lords, including Morales and Guzmán, were even harassed, threatened or beaten by fellow members of the organization. When Morales left the party, it was a “small group run by Gloria Fontáñez,” who led an “unthinking clique who did her bidding, including intimidation

and violence against those members who disagreed with her.”⁴¹ By 1976 the PRRWO was defunct.

Government repression was the crucial factor in the destruction of the Young

Lords. Had it not been for the infiltration and harassment by authorities, the organization might have survived the failed attempt to export revolution to Puerto Rico and the takeover by Fontáñez.

Members would have been more trusting of each other without the fear of infiltration; Fontáñez and her crew could not have so easily labeled other members as “right opportunists”

and agents of the state. Resources and individuals dedicated to the armed underground branch of the group could have been reserved for the popular community programs which engendered so much support from El Barrio.

But official repression alone does not explain the rapid decline of the Lords. The period of growth that included successful direct action offensives against everything from garbage to failing hospitals lasted just under two years. The Lords’ tactics in those days were brilliant, but undemocratic military structure of the organization that made it susceptible to mistakes, infiltration, and repression. The Central Committee, which began as the five college-educated founders and never grew to be more than ten individuals, always controlled the organization through the rigid hierarchy of ministers and cadres below it.

So much power was concentrated in the Central Committee that for much of the Lords’

existence, the women and rank-and-file urban youth who made up the bulk of the membership did not have a say in the organization. Without any sort of elections, the Committee members were accountable to each other but not to the membership at large. It took the women months of caucusing on their own and going on a “no sex” strike to force the leadership to address rampant misogyny. Felipe Luciano, the original chairman of the Lords whose charisma was a huge asset, was demoted from the committee in 1970 and left the group shortly thereafter. Had power been better distributed among the Lords, his popularity would have kept him within the leadership or he might have valued his place as an ordinary member following the demotion. The hundreds of Puerto Rican youth from the streets who became Lords were unlikely to have consented to cutting ties with the Chicago chapter because it was “too street” or not ideological enough.

The alternative to para-militarism was to practice real democratic centralism.

Central Committee members could have been elected by the general membership. Or the Lords could have maintained a more decentralized structure of various ministries, each with their own internal election – or consensus-based processes, that coordinated with one another through a steering committee or as a federation. Any means of distributing power among the members whose day-to-day connection to the community was the source of the Lords’ strength would have solidified the group’s foundation. The Lords were most effective when they demonstrated, usually through dramatic and well-planned direct actions against everything from garbage to failing hospitals, that Puerto Ricans in the ghettos could join together to challenge the institutional racism and poverty perpetrated by the government and society.

There is no reason to think that the membership could not have collectively continued to execute such direct actions through democratic means.

Whether a more democratic Lords could have withstood official repression or misadventure on the island of Puerto Rico cannot be known. But it strikes me as unlikely that the less-ideological rank-and-file El Barrio youth would have oriented the Lords around Puerto Rican independence in the first place, a move which split the leadership and intensified the FBI’s scrutiny of the group. Fontáñez certainly would not have been able to take over the organization so easily. If rank-and-file Lords exercised control over the organization, infiltrators might have found it more difficult to move into positions of leadership. In short,

the Lords’ strength was in their base. Decision-making power should have been concentrated there, rather than in a small group of individuals at the top.

None of this is meant to downplay what the Lords accomplished. Despite the group’s flaws, they are rightly seen by many as representing “the best of sixties radicalism.”⁴² Like other marginalized groups, they took the militant organizing model of the Black Panthers and successfully applied it to their own situation – and like many of those groups, they fell under the intense pressure of the government’s authoritarian apparatus. The Lords secured numerous concrete improvements in healthcare for the El Barrio community, from the banning of lead paint to the building of a new hospital, and likely saved hundreds of lives.

The group was stunningly progressive in its explicit opposition to racism and eventual opposition to sexism and homophobia within the Puerto Rican community. The Lords spurred on a new generation of Puerto Rican nationalist

activism. In 1977, the year following the PPRWO's collapse, a group of activists including several former Lords took over Ellis Island and draped a Puerto Rican flag across the Lady Liberty's forehead. The action succeeded in pressuring then-President Carter into freeing several Puerto Rican political prisoners. Indeed, Puerto Rican nationalism is alive and well to this day, as is the legacy of the Lords. Whether the Lords' militant community organizing could have survived the repression had there not been a deficit of democracy within the group, no one can know for sure. But radicals can try not to make the same mistakes next time.

Written December 10, 2008 and taken from Mediahacker



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36. Iris Morales, Director, *Palante Siempre Palante! The Young Lords*, 1996.



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